COMING TO TERMS WITH QWL

by

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Discussions about Quality of Working Life are often characterized by confusion, misunderstanding and lack of proper definitions. This difficulty is compounded when QWL is discussed from the point of view of trade unions, and it can develop Babylonian proportions when placed in the context of union-management relations.

Ironically, this phenomenon is basically positive. It is a reflection of the fact that there are now more QWL programs and activities than ever before. Confusion is inevitable in various stages of development, discussion and debate.

This short paper attempts to clear up some of the more common misunderstandings.

Quality of Working Life is determined by many factors which govern the relationship between people and their work environment. Anyone's list includes such well-recognized conditions as wages, hours, job security, due process and health and safety. But QWL is also determined by the fact that people have the ability and willingness to learn, and the need and capability for responsibility and autonomy. Whether or not these basic needs and abilities are accommodated in the workplace depends on their recognition in the way jobs are designed and work is organized. All these conditions together form a domain which we can call Quality of Working Life.

CONFUSION 1

This is where the confusion starts. From the point of view of semantics, it is appropriate to call this entire domain 'QWL.' This use of the term includes all those factors which affect the physical, social, economic, psychological and cultural well-being of workers. We can call this the general approach.

However, from the point of view of a specific development of the last 30 years, it is misleading to use 'QWL' in this all-encompassing way. The actual term 'QWL' was introduced only ten years ago. It refers specifically to an approach to the design and operation of organizations in accordance with the values of democratic society. We can call this the organizational approach to QWL. This design strategy is based on an explicit set of values, principles and notions about organizations as systems and about the behaviour of people in organizations which were developed by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in England in the 1950s and '60s.

The labour movement has played a major part in shaping this development. The British miners' union was involved with management from the beginning in the work of the Tavistock Institute which was engaged in a study of the work organization miners themselves had created. It was what Eric Trist and others learned from the miners that led the Institute to develop its ideas about semi-autonomous work groups and socio-technical systems. In fact they entitled their ground-breaking publication 'The Lost, Rediscovery and Transformation of a Work Tradition.'

In Norway the nation-wide industrial democracy project was jointly controlled by union and management from the outset. This project blazed the trail to innovative approaches to work organization in other parts of the world.

In North America QWL was first raised in collective bargaining in 1971 by Irving Bluestone of the UAW. In 1973, it became part of the UAW master contract with General Motors.

The organizational approach is based on the recognition that people have multiple capabilities and on the fact that there is organizational choice. QWL means designing jobs and organizing work in such a way that one achieves the best fit between the social and psychological needs of people (e.g. need for autonomy, variety and learning) and the requirement of the particular production system, the technology. This approach is also known as the socio-technical system approach.

It makes a big difference whether the term QWL is applied in a general way, i.e. to such factors as hours or pay -- which do not necessarily increase the level of on-the-job autonomy -- or whether it has an organizational focus, i.e. the democratization of work, the participative design of the work system.

The first use of 'QWL' refers usually to the content of an existing system and does not challenge scientific management which is still the dominant form of organization in today's society. The second use of 'QWL' portrays the context, the

structure of a new organizational system, which is based on workplace autonomy and self-management.

The latter approach will by definition also affect such items as pay systems or hours of work. The Ontario QWL Centre bases its approach on the second meaning of 'QWL.'

CONFUSION 2

By position, by right and by responsibility, both unions and management are inherently linked to QWL. However, in the practice of developing QWL in the context of union-management relationships, we can distinguish two approaches based on different and often unstated assumptions. These assumptions, with their different implications, create another source of confusion about QWL.

The difference relates to a difference in the point of departure. At the QWL Centre, the point of departure is QWL as an organizational design strategy, which is then placed in the context of union-management relations. Since QWL is concerned with the design of systems, it will have an impact on the organization of both management and the trade union, as well as on the system characteristics governing the relationship between union and management. In this approach, union-management cooperation is seen both as a critical condition for the development of QWL, and as a consequence of QWL activities. But it should not be equated with QWL.

In the other approach, collaboration between union and management is taken as point of departure. Subsequently, an area for collaboration is selected. It could be profit sharing, or health and safety, or the involvement of workers in problem solving, or perhaps even QWL in the sense of increasing the on-the-job autonomy of workers.

In the second approach, however, the QWL focus is mostly of a general nature and is usually not concerned with the organization of work. Labour-management committees and similar forms of worker involvement are good illustrations of this development, in which union-management collaboration and QWL are almost defined as synonymous. Since organizational design is mostly not part of this orientation, there is rarely a direct impact on the organizational features of either union or management, or on the characteristics of the union-management system. Furthermore, it can be difficult to change from a non-organizational orientation to a QWL focus dealing with structural changes, as the non-orgnanizational approach may have reinforced the existing work system.

On occasion, the point of departure and the orientations in this approach will reinforce each other and can lead unions and management away from QWL design strategies. Indeed collaboration between union and management can become a defence against QWL where neither party is interested in structural change.

Despite significant differences in assumptions and values, the term 'QWL' is used to describe both approaches. Needless to say, this only adds to the confusion about the meaning and merit of QWL.

CONFUSION 3

The third category of confusion is quite distinct from the previous two. In this category, we encounter all kinds of statements about QWL' which have nothing to do with QWL as such. Instead, 'QWL' becomes some kind of catchword.

The spectrum of misuses includes clearly false applications, where the activity referred to is in obvious contradiction with QWL. One sees in North America various practices and approaches in the workplace which often go under the label of QWL but which bear little resemblance to the values and principles of QWL, such as the use of 'worker involvement programs' to decertify unions.

Another, more complex misuse of the term QWL refers to views about the various conditions necessary to engage fruitfully in a QWL process. For instance, some people think they are commenting on QWL when in actual fact they are making a judgment about the motivations of the other party, or about the extent they can be trusted.

Hidden behind these views about motivation and trust, we often find uncertainty and fear about one's ability to control

situations or to influence the decisions of the other party. Feelings of insecurity and lack of power are often expressed by way of negative statements about QWL.

Another example of misuse of the term QWL is seen when management or unions declare themselves 'against QWL' when in fact they are expressing unease about new demands which will be made on them. It has to do with personal competence and the ability of the management or union system to cope with new and somewhat unpredictable demands.

In these cases people are not so much criticizing QWL, they are expressing their own fears and uncertainties about moving into new situations.

Union and management must be jointly involved and must share responsibility for the process. QWL will not do away with conflict or with the adversary system. However, it will help to reduce unnecessary conflict and will assist in developing a more mature and constructive process of conflict resolution.

The development of QWL in the workplace is not a quick fix, it is not the application of a 'technique.' It is a long and complex process of organizational change and includes changes in the structure of work, changes in the roles of workers, shop stewards and foremen, changes in attitudes and in relationships.

QWL is above all a process of search and learning. Every work situation has to translate the general values and principles of QWL in terms of the specific circumstances of its own situation. The opportunities for autonomy, for variety, for learning, for working with fellow workers, will differ for each production system and technology and will have to be tailormade to fit each specific work environment.

The question of whether QWL fits the objectives of the trade union movement is in a way an artifical one. One can argue that by definition, unions are concerned about and involved in the QWL of their members and must play an active part in 'managing' the process if QWL is going to be for real.

However, the question may be simple but the answer is not necessarily an easy one. Becoming involved in a QWL process raises concerns about how this will fit in the present reality of industrial relations and in today's role and position of the unions.

QWL is making new demands on the unions and will affect the role of the shop steward and other union officials. Joint involvement with management requires more flexibility on the part of union officers to handle both the wider range of issues being addressed and the different relationship from strongly representing members' interest to joint problem-solving with employers.

On the question of membership support, the prevailing experience has been that active involvement in a quality of working life project has strengthened the relationship between members and the union local. One reason for this is that the range of contacts between members and the union is extended both in terms of time -- throughout the period between collective bargaining -- and by extending the range of issues of immediate interest to individuals that the union becomes involved in.

A major concern of unions is with regard to the possible effect of QWL on the collective bargaining process and the collective agreement. QWL can be considered an extension of the scope of collective bargaining and one sees various developments in which QWL principles and conditions are being included in the collective agreement. One example of this trend can be seen in the document of the United Steelworkers of America entitled 'Towards a Trade Union QWL Agenda' in which the position is taken that QWL must be dealt with through the collective agreement. The complexity of the world we live in combined with the reality of the QWL process do not provide easy and single solutions for the questions which the labour movement is facing when trying to improve the quality of the working life of their members. There are many obstacles to overcome. However, several positive developments are emerging in Ontario.

This brief discussion of different types of confusion only gives a limited illustration of different attitudes, positions and strategies behind the term QWL. The actual reality of QWL can

be much more complex, but it can also be much simpler. Union, management and workers who are actively involved in improving QWL, and who work together and learn in the shared reality of the workplace, are usually not confused.